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Creative Nonfiction workshop

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Blue Skies

In this place, here and now as I write this I feel old. People that helped me become who I am are quickly disappearing. Simple acts of trust given to a younger me opened my Texan farm boy eyes to more than my fantasy loving self thought I would ever see or do. My shell was so thick, it took years to chip away. One of those people that in 1995 helped me start seeing the world is now on an obituary page. He died in Sept of 2011. I was going through some sites looking up information to remind me of that long ago year, when on a remembrance blog I read…

Allan Alfonz Trone passed away in his home on Sept. 15th 2011, due to health problems that had been increasing in recent years, including a near fatal stroke in 2010.   
  
Alfonz had accumulated over 5000 skydives during the late 80's in Minnesota/Wisconson and as dropzone manager at Skydive Colorado in the early 90's and at Skydive Dallas throughout the rest of the 90's. Alfonz was a master rigger, Aff and SL instructor, tandem master and anything else you can think of at a DZ. He put in a few years in Skydive Las Vegas and then health conditions grounded him the last ten years.   
  
Alphonz trained many people, and had a direct positive impact on many skydivers experiences in the sky, in the sport, and in the business.   
Blue Skies, Man.

It was 1995 and I was twenty two years old and worked as an underground electrical lineman. That was an inflated term meaning I dug trenches and lay insulated service lines to all the new housing developments northwest of Dallas, Texas. I had spent two months working with a very unpleasant Texas redneck that loved the name Bubba. This man stood about six foot three inches tall and weighed about two hundred and fifty pounds. Every bit of him was the redblooded, country music listening, lucky if he graduated High school bully type. I hated working with him and he hated me. We would constantly argue with each other like an old married couple. I put up with the horrible music and smell of rotting onions that came from him and concentrated on just getting through every day.

Pulling the heavy black coated wire off the back of the truck was a pain. First, you would look at the surveyor marks and line everything up with the blueprint. Next, he would drive the truck forward as I held the end of the wire roll to start the measurements until there was enough wire to connect the section we were working on. Then we would use a trencher and shovels to dig the trench, back fill the hole then connect the ends, simple enough. Not when you are working with a prejudiced fool. The whole time that I had worked with Bubba he constantly accused me “You sound like a Goddamn Yankee.” Then question me “W’are u frum?” I would tell him “Man I was born in Dallas and raised in Tom Bean.” (Tom Bean was about an hour north of Dallas). This happened a couple time per week. He just knew since I could finish my words properly that was a sign of being a dreaded Yankee.

One day while we were in Flower Mound, he started with the normal questions but I did not feel like answering the same. I was so tired of his inquisitions “Are you really starting this shit again?” I responded. “You jist ain’t frum the south,” I heard. I decided to add a new point “Well when I was two, we moved to Maine for about six months, but came right back.” “I knu you were a Goddamn Yankee!” made my ears ring. “You stole my fucking niggers!” he screamed. Now accused for some theft, at last this made me realize Bubba was battshit insane. I honestly had no clue at first even what he was talking about until I thought about history. He then sharply raped my consciousness with a tale of his great-great grandfather’s plantation that he would have somehow inherited in some other state. I tried to tell him in simple terms that timelines would not have been the same and he would not be wasting my brain cells usefulness if things would have been different. My only audio response was “fucking Yankee.”

Later that day, I was pulling some wire through a trench, I really was not paying any attention to him. I was wearing my standard safety equipment a hardhat and insulated line gloves. I pulled the wire through our trench and as I strained against an unseen blockage it suddenly released. It seemed the uneducated, close-minded piece of crap was charging the line while I held it. After hooking it up he let go suddenly so I could pull it. Straight into my chest it went with ten thousand volts from a powerline and I flew at least ten feet. I did not pass out, I just was completely stunned and could not move very well. When I could focus my eyes again I saw him standing over me and heard “fucking Yankee.” He proceeded to get into the truck and left me stranded fifty miles south of my car.

Happy that I had not pissed on myself from the charge, I walked in the direction of the nearest gas station. Two miles later I used a payphone to call a friend to get me back to my car.

About three weeks before this happened, I was in the back seat of a car with two of my old high school friends. We had been in Dallas on Greenville avenue club hopping. On the way back to where I lived, a young kid with great insurance coverage rear-ended us. As a result all three of us ended up with five thousand dollars apiece for a settlement. The smoke billowed out of my pocket.

My brother was lucky, after getting out of prison in 93 for kidnapping and not having a fuck ton of marketable job skills (except extreme personality) he applied and started working at Skydive Dallas. The General Manager of Sky-dive Dallas (SD), Alfonz Trone, liked my brother’s charisma. Realizing that there would be a major boost in the Manifest office my brother was hired. He now was able to make enough money that he could rent a nice apartment and bought a car.

That money burned and smoked up the hole in my pocket gave me a way to visit my brother at work, the lack of a job set the date and time of my first jump. Skydive Dallas was not, as the name makes it sound, in Dallas it was actually about sixty miles north. It also was only about twelve miles from my native town of Tom Bean. Built in an out of the high sky-traffic zone so not to have to wait for clearance from the big airports and surrounded by thousands of acres of farmland to cover misslandings. The drive there, the thoughts were rolling’ what the hell are you doing?’ It wasn’t a fear of falling and burning in it was just the initial first step nagging at me. ‘You could spend the money on other things,’ my inner voice pleaded. “Shut up,” I said out loud. Driving South past the town of Whitewright, I soon saw the blue painted sign for Skydive Dallas with an arrow pointing to turn.

I followed the white rock, dusty road and was piloted to a large metal barn-like structure painted red with a gravel parking lot. As I park, I noticed four airplanes sitting by the building two Cessna 182s, a large Cessna Caravan and a plane that I would eventually have a love affair with a pink Pilatus Porter. I got out of my car and went to the manifest office. “Hey dickcheese” I yelled with all the nervous energy in my body about as contained as a hurricane. My brother turned around, “So are you going to do it?” It was like he had been expecting me.

“I quit my job” I told him. “Now I think I will jump, what do I need to do?” He handed me an information pamphlet “These are the prices and the services you get for them.” I looked at the paper and decided for my first time, I should be strapped to someone, “I guess I will do the tandem so if I freak I live.” I paid the fee and signed the obligatory waiver saying if I died I wouldn’t sue.

“Now that all of the business part is done, let’s have fun,” he said coming out of the office. I walked into the metal building and it was a huge warehouse looking structure on the inside. It had on one side a café on the back wall a large area was build into a separate building for the rigging and videos. Above the rigging area, below the metal roof of the building was a ladder that led to a loft for visiting skydivers to have a place to crash. Men, Women it didn’t matter, the bunks slept everybody. A couple of people that worked here lived in the loft.

As we walked, my brother’s wife Jenifer came out of the video office where she worked and gave me a hug. “I am going to do it,” I told her. “Great I will do your video. I am in the middle of one now,” she says as she goes back into the videoroom. I follow my brother to the café and we find a couple of people in there. “Hey Alfonz, this is my brother Chris. He is about to do his first jump. He quit his job and needs one do we have anything he can do?”

I look at my brother with a big what the fuck streaming across my face.

“What can he do?” asked Alfonz in his gravelly voice from way to many smokes.

“He has his food handler’s card, he can drive anything and is dependable,” he answered

Alfonz turned to me and said “After your jump come and see me we could use a mutt.” He turned around and left. I was just freaked and stunned. I was about to jump out of a plane and I got a job all at the same time.

“Hey Mike” I hear from behind me. I turned and the other person that was in the room started talking to my brother. Mike told him that I was about to do a tandem and asked him to video it. “Ok Chris, this is Dave and he is going to record you jumping and landing. Then Jenifer will edit it into a video to keep, I have to get back to work.” my brother walks off.

I walked over to Dave trying not to show any fear or emotions and doing a positively horrible job at it. “Hey Dave I am Chris, Mike’s brother.” I wondered how he could film me jumping and landing if we were jumping out of the same plane. I figured it was a common sense thing that I was too nervous to figure out at that moment, so I did not ask.

Dave introduced himself and took me out into the big warehouse looking area. He found me a flight suit of ugly ass neon red and a helmet. About that time another man approached, he introduced himself as the man that I would be riding with. Together they gave me training in the basics of skydiving and how to control things incase my partner gets hurt.

My brother comes out of the office dressed in a flight suit at this point “Let’s go.”

“I didn’t know you were going brother,” I told him.

“I wasn’t going to let you go alone.” It seems he had around 90 jumps so far and thought he would get another by watching if I screamed.

We made our way out to the runway which was nothing more than hard packed dirt which all of the planes were designed to use. We walked over to the Cessna Caravan which when you look at it really reminds you of a minivan. It was white with sky blue detailing. My partner and I were the first ones in so we would be the last out. Dave was next, and then my brother after that a couple of people that I did not even know were there. The engines started and I felt my heart start pumping and heard the blood in my ears. While we were taxied, my momentary best friend and I hooked up linking all the clamps and checked over everything.

Suddenly I felt the power increase and we started shaking. Then every clod of dirt and grass turned into a new vibration as we took off. The nose lifted first, then all was smooth and I knew we were airborne. The ground was getting further and further away and I could see forever. I loved it, this was my home area where I grew up from the air.

A strange design stated to show below us the higher we got. The dropzone was shaped like a large question mark. Where the bottom and the dot would be is the road to turn on and the crook at the top of the design is the building and where you are supposed to land. I suppose that makes it easier to know where to go if you get disoriented in the air. Pop, my ears would not stop over and over I have to yawn. We leveled off and a light came on the person in the front threw open the door pulled down his goggles smiles and screamed a loud Yeehaw and just disappeared. Ok now I am about to freak, my brother looked at me knowingly and laughed as he made his way to the door. He gave a big thumbs up and disappeared. FUCK! Me and my partner scooted down to the door, Dave looked at us with his helmet cam as he stood on the outside of the door. As we got closer I saw a little ledge and a grip for people to hang on to the outside of the plane. I push my legs over the edge of the plane and look down. In-between my legs 13,500ft below me is the ground. I was so scared I did not know how to show it, so I just did what I had come to do.

On the video you can see me go out the door with a person on my back. My legs, for about 2 seconds, were flailing madly. My face was as white as a dead person. However, about 5 seconds into the jump you see my face smile and me start to look around.

With my legs pointed down Dave on my left hanging on to the plane, we let go. Time seemed to slow down, I was thinking what the fuck did I just do. I looked and Dave is still right beside me but he was flying. Then it hit me I am flying. I felt myself relax and I started to look at things. I couldn’t hear anything at all. The wind was so loud it almost hurt . I saw Dave now flying around me, circling. This is crazy, I loved it. I looked back to the ground and we were at terminal velocity so we were falling at 120mph but the ground does not look like it is getting closer. The ground appeared to be getting clearer, like a telescope being focused. Sharper and sharper the image got until I felt the pat on my shoulder, the signal to open the chute. I pulled the ring and suddenly the world changed. Silence reigned as we slowed. A strap that goes between by legs tightened more than it should and wracked the hell out of me but I did not care. Silence was overwhelming. I have never imagined that it could be this, floating with the birds and clouds with the real world still a few thousand feet below. I looked down and saw a parachute open far below and the answer to how Dave would film me land was reveled.